

Long-term Care Communities Make Good Neighbors



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As a former local elected official and healthcare administrator, I know first-hand the benefits and disadvantages that are generally associated with having a nursing home, assisted living facility, or retirement community located in your municipality.

Perhaps the greatest challenge associated with having a long-term care (LTC) community in your midst is the impact on the local emergency services personnel and—to a lesser degree—local law enforcement.

Given the frailty of the seniors they care for, long-term care facilities generate a significant number of ambulance and emergency medical assistance calls. In some communities, multi-level senior housing presents a particularly daunting challenge to fire and rescue and emergency management personnel. They are faced with overseeing the implementation of effective evacuation plans for a vulnerable and, in many instances, non-ambulatory population.

While the demands on local services can be sizeable, I would submit that the benefits of having a long-term facility in your community far outweigh the disadvantages.

Aging in Place First, local long-term care facilities make it possible for area residents to live out their final years in their hometowns. Too often, elderly residents who can no longer stay in their homes are forced to move a town or two away to receive residential long-term care services.

Optimally, these long-time residents should be able to stay close to their places of worship, their friends and their families.

Intergenerational Interaction Having a long-term care facility in your community also creates opportunities for intergenerational educational opportunities. Having elderly people engaged with the local school district—as guest speakers or as volunteers—enriches the experience of school children. This promotes a greater understanding of the aging process and engenders empathy for people with disabilities.



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We live in a society where grandparents and grandchildren are more likely to be separated geographically than in past generations. Children who do not have regular contact with a grandparent or elderly friend or relative may be more likely to have negative feelings about aging and feel uncomfortable around seniors. Fostering greater interaction with elderly residents of a long-term care facility benefits these children and, some studies show, may have the added benefit of reducing the incidence of depression among residents of the nursing home.

Volunteer Opportunities A local nursing home or assisted living facility presents local school children and service organizations with meaningful volunteer opportunities and service projects. I can tell you from first-hand experience that residents of long-term care communities enthusiastically welcome interaction with the larger community. And they are particularly receptive to interaction with young people.

The volunteer opportunities to which I am referring include volunteer opportunities with my office.

Since being appointed as Ombudsman by Governor Chris Christie in December 2010, my staff and I have worked to increase the number of OOIE (Office of the Ombudsman

for the Institutionalized Elderly) volunteers assigned to New Jersey nursing homes. Our volunteers—called volunteer advocates—are the OOIE's "eyes and ears" in long-term care facilities. They receive 32 hours of training and are required to spend at least four hours a week in their assigned facility.

We currently have roughly 200 active volunteers, a 30 percent increase since we began to jump-start our recruitment efforts in the spring of 2011. Perhaps most importantly, our volunteers are placed in facilities that are in their own communities or close to their homes. The beauty of this is that our volunteers are familiar with area resources that can be brought to bear to assist LTC residents, and can play an active role in fostering greater community engagement with people living in a long-term care facility.

Further, long-term care communities often provide a public forum for all segments of the community. Most long-term care facilities have meeting rooms and community space that are available for use by local groups and organizations. In addition, many LTC facilities host public education forums, health screenings and wellness events that target not just their own residents, but also members of the larger community.

Positive Economic Impact Another major benefit of having a long-term care facility is the positive economic impact it creates. These communities provide customers for local businesses and generate jobs for local residents. And, generally speaking, the jobs are stable and include benefits.

According to the US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics' 2010 to 2020 projections, "The healthcare and social assistance industry is projected to create about 28 percent of all new jobs created in the U.S. economy. This industry—which includes public and private hospitals, nursing and residential care facilities, and individual and family services—is expected to grow by 33 percent, or 5.7 million new jobs. Employment growth will be driven by an aging population and longer life expectancies, as well as new treatments and technologies."

According to a 2011 report by the Alliance for Quality Nursing Home Care, the nursing home industry

employs more than 1.6 million people and generates more than \$200 billion in economic activity.

I WOULD ENCOURAGE YOU TO FOSTER A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE RESIDENTS, EMPLOYEES AND ADMINISTRATORS WHO LIVE AND WORK IN LOCAL LONG-TERM CARE COMMUNITIES.

Because New Jersey has stringent staffing regulations governing long-term care facilities, the staffing ratios for these facilities is generally very intense. This translates into safer conditions for residents and more jobs for local citizens.

Property Management While there are undoubtedly some exceptions, most long-term care communities keep their properties neat and clean

and pay attention to facility upkeep. This is due to both their effort to be a good neighbor and economic necessity. LTCs need to have "curb appeal" to attract customers.

Your Voters, Your Constituents Finally, it is no secret that seniors are some of the most civically engaged and politically involved citizens among today's electorate. Whatever your political persuasion, we all know that elections are decided by those who cast their votes—and seniors are the most likely to vote. According to a March 2012 U.S. News and World Report article, "some 61 percent of citizens age 65 and older voted in the November 2010 election, the best turnout of any age group."

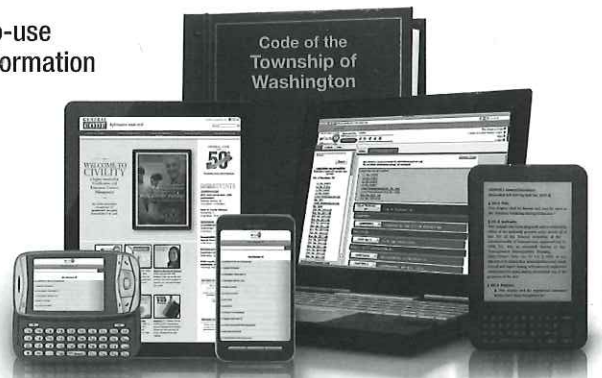
Having a relationship with your constituents in long-term care communities affords you an opportunity to hear their concerns and turn that feedback into constructive actions on their behalf. Similarly, it affords you an opportunity to explain and gain support for the policies and programs that you think are important.

In closing, I would encourage you to foster a relationship with the residents, employees and administrators who live and work in local long-term care communities. Opening the lines of communication and interaction will enrich the lives of everyone involved and benefit to your community. ▲

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